The Price Of Professional Silence: The Place Of The Social Work Profession On Zimbabwe's Human Rights Arena

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ABSTRACT

The place of the social work profession in the human rights arena is beyond doubt. To this end, social work strives to eliminate distress, improve the social functioning of individuals, groups and communities as well as promoting social justice. Zimbabwe has been confronted by a plethora of human rights challenges mainly towards and during elections. Various professional bodies have taken it upon themselves to safeguard the rights of the generality of citizens. Social work profession has emerged as the odd one out in this quest for visibility in the face of social distress resulting from political and governance problems.

Introduction

According to Sheafor and Horejsi (1998), social work is a profession characterized by diversity. In this light, at the very fundamental level, social work is a profession devoted to helping people function as well as they can within their social environment and to changing their environments to make that possible. Paradoxically the social work profession in Zimbabwe does not seem to embrace the major purpose of social work which is that of helping people meet social needs or eliminate difficulties so that they might make maximum use of their abilities to lead full and satisfying lives. It is here observed that contrary to the social work ethos, social workers in Zimbabwe have elected to take a back seat amidst social and political disturbances (Sowers & Dulmus 2008).

This paper posits that failure of the social work profession to deal with pressing issues affecting the society amounts to a negation of professional values (Mmatli, 2008; Briskman, 2008). It is the contention of this paper that the issue of human rights promotion is central to national development and poverty alleviation. It is from such a paradigmatic persuasion that in line with the African social work agenda; the profession should indigenize and position itself to confront the main challenges that haunt Africa (Mupedziswa, 1992, Ankrah, 1987, Kaseke, 1991). The purpose of this paper is to implore the social work profession in Zimbabwe to perceive and understand human rights in their entirety take their place in the fight against social injustice.

Notwithstanding the indivisibility of rights, this paper proffers the argument that the political challenges Zimbabwe has been going through since the past decade had a negative impact on the realization of the economic, social and cultural rights. It is further contended that such rights constitute the domain of social work practice.

CONCEPTUALISING HUMAN RIGHTS

"We hold these truths to be self-evident, that all men are created equal, that they are endowed by their Creator with certain unalienable Rights that among these are Life, Liberty and the pursuit of Happiness. . . . That to secure these rights, Governments are instituted among Men, deriving their just powers from the consent of the governed, . . That whenever any Form of Government becomes destructive of these ends, it is the Right of the People to alter or to abolish it, and to institute new Government, laying its foundation on such principles and organizing its powers in such form, as to them shall seem most likely to affect their Safety and Happiness" (Langlois, undated:13). This famous statement from the American constitutional architects constitutes a pillar upon which the modern human rights ideals are predicated. Writing about social work and human rights in the Middle East, Al Gharaibeh (2011) makes an observation that "developing human rights is the struggle for meeting the need for freedom and equality everywhere in the world. Human rights are not purchased, gained or inherited; they are simply the ownership of the people that are human beings. They are inherent in every

individual, regardless of race, sex, religion, political opinion (or any other opinion), national or social origin; they are indivisible" (Al Gharaibeh, 2011: 231).

The civil and political rights terrain in Zimbabwe has been unstable (Ploch, 2010, Crisis in Zimbabwe Coalition, 2011; Murisa, 2010;Zimbabwe NGO Human Rights Forum, 2005). The principle of interdependence of human rights recognizes the difficulty and, in many cases, the impossibility of realizing any one human right in isolation (United Nations, 1992). The realization and enjoyment of social and economic rights in the context of economic stability and development is dependent upon the realization of civil and political rights that result in a stable political environment ′ (Crisis in Zimbabwe Coalition, 2011: 2).

 According to Ife, (2001) the popular perception of the meaning of the term 'human rights' has been largely confined to civil and political rights, sometimes referred to as the 'first generation' of human rights: the right to vote, freedom of speech, freedom of expression, freedom of assembly, the right not to be imprisoned without fair trial, the right of access to the law, the right to be protected from torture, the right to join a trade union, the right to minimum labour standards, and so on. This paper, though paying due cogniscence to the principle of indivisibility of rights is mainly concerned about the second generation of rights. The so-called 'second generation' of human rights incorporates economic, social and cultural rights: the right to work, the right to adequate health services, the right to housing, the right to education, the right to economic security, the right to freedom of cultural expression, and so on. Such rights do not usually occupy a permanent space within the human rights discourse. For example a country with inadequate health services or a poor education system would not be described as a country with a 'poor human rights record'. Yet such human rights are just as important as the first generation of civil and political rights, and indeed they go together (Beetham 1999) quoted in Al Gharaibeh (2011).

Another set of rights is the so-called third generation rights. Al Garaibeh (2011) refers to these as collective rights. These include the right to economic development, political stability and the right to clean air or clean environment. As Ife (2001: 3) puts it "there is not much point in having good education or health services, and adequate legal protection for the right of free speech, if people are dying because they cannot drink clean water, or breathe polluted air, and if people are unable to participate in the benefits of economic development". In light of these sets of rights, this paper focuses mainly on economic, social and political rights. This is in no way meant to relegate social work to the peripheries of rights discourse but just to ensure that the argument is put into perspective. It is here contended that in keeping with the professional values of safeguarding human rights and promoting social justice, social workers have been surpassed by other professions such as Lawyers, Journalist, and Doctors. In the middle of a social and political crisis, social workers folded their hands yet other concerned citizens took a bold step in their various formations such as the Poets for Human Rights Zimbabwe, Progressive Teachers Union of Zimbabwe and the Media Institute of Southern Africa.

THE NEXUS BETWEEN HUMAN RIGHTS AND SOCIAL WORK PRACTISE
The underpinning values of social work clearly align with human rights framework, particularly in relation to upholding the importance of individual worth and dignity, liberty, affirming freedom and spear heading social justice (Healy, 2008). In fact the basic principals underlying human rights present little that is new to the social work profession (Reichert, 2006). The social work profession advocate for human dignity and worth means in that regard social workers respect the inherent dignity and worth of every person and respect the human rights expressed in the United Nations Universal Declaration of Human Rights (United Nations Center for Human Rights, 1948). In this regard Social work can be considered a human-rights-based profession, as indicated by the commitment to International Human Rights Declarations and Conventions (Ife, 2001).The closing statement enshrined in the International definition of Social Work postulates that Principles of Human Rights and social justice are fundamental to Social Work (International Federation of Social Workers, 2000). This affirms the centrality of social justice and human rights to the social work profession.
Social workers are sanctioned to prevent and eliminate domination of, exploitation of, and deprivation of freedom and liberties against any person or group on any basis (International Federation of Social Workers, 2012). The place of social work in the human rights arena is further cemented by the manual on Human Rights and Social Work, which states that "More than many professions, social work educators and practitioners are conscious that their concerns are closely linked to respect for human rights. They accept the premise that human rights and fundamental freedoms are indivisible, and that the full realization of civil and political rights is impossible without enjoyment of economic, social and cultural rights" (United Nations Center for Human Rights, 1994: 5).

KEY MILESTONES IN ZIMBABWE'S HUMAN RIGHTS RECORD

Although social work intervention is required within all aspects of society, this paper has elected to select a few areas within Zimbabwe's various social and political milestones.

THE FAST TRACK LAND REFORM PROGRAMME

The general propensity amongst politicians, agrarians and the academia is that land reform is necessary and noble to address the stark inequalities in land distribution and wealth that emanated from the colonial past. Although the idea land distribution is shared by almost all Zimbabweans, the method employed has created a rift with in the political and social spheres. Of critical concern is the violent nature of land seizures, the plight of farm labourers as well as the impact of the exercise on food security. Whilst social workers have conveniently decided to maintain their silence in the face of this radicalized land debacle, the implications of such a state of affairs to national development should force social workers to speak out. According to Marongwe, (2010) disruptions and distortions associated with the Fast track Land Reform Programme has seen food aid emerging as a strong intervention aimed at fighting poverty.

In an effort to promote sustainable development and warding off the dependency syndrome, social work has a role to play in Zimbabwe's Fast track Land Reform Programme.

"Social work and sustainable development constitute the core of human rights because social work aims at community development and addresses the problems that are beyond the ability of individuals who suffer from them and cause hardship for them" (Al Gharaibeh, 2011: 235). Further, social work selects the most appropriate means or effective means in society for the elimination or mitigation of the impact of these problems. It does this by searching for the forces and various factors that prevent growth and social progress, such as deprivation, unemployment, disease and poor living conditions. It is worth observing that using Ife's argument, social work and human rights are indispensable. Just as Ife (2001) would maintain, human rights and social welfare are intimately connected. Social welfare is, at heart, a matter of human rights, and those concerned with social welfare are, in a real sense, human rights workers (Ife 2001).

 According to Magaramombe (2001) the fast track Land Reform program has social and economic implications on the livelihoods of commercial farm workers. Farm workers in these situations are one of the most vulnerable groups experiencing displacement, destitution and loss of employment, which cause further hardships. Advocacy is the cornerstone upon which social work is built. As a consequence, it is here observed that the social work profession could have done a lot in this area to avert or at least ameliorate the plight of farm workers and their families.

OPERATION RESTORE ORDER

Another of the key areas where the roles and actions of the Social Work profession was called into question is the operation code named Operation Murambatwina (literal meaning clear the filth) where the government embarked on a massive demolition of illegal housing structures throughout the country. In 2005, the government embarked on Operation Murambatsvina (local language) for "clear the filth", but translated by the government of Zimbabwe as "Restore Order", a programme of mass forced eviction (Tibaijuka, 2005). This operation left some 700,000 people without a home, livelihood or both (Ploch, 2010; Tibaijuka, 2005). The violent destruction by the police and local authority personals resulted in mass evictions of urban dwellers from their homes and the closure of informal sector businesses throughout the country (Human Rights Watch ,2007).

Such actions on the part of government compromised the social functioning of the urban poor. Becket (2006), defines social functioning as the social wellbeing, especially with regard to the ability of an individual to meet the role expectations associated with a particular social status or role. . The wanton destruction of informal sector infrastructure by government in the middle of the highest level of unemployment in modern history literally compromised people's ability to accomplish activities necessary for daily living. In the light of the foregoing, it is here contended that Zimbabwean social workers failed to bear in mind the fact that human rights are about social welfare; they are about making sure that the welfare of all human beings is adequately safeguarded and adequately realised.

Evidence from the United Nations report points to the fact that the said operation infringed on several key civil and political human rights, including the right to life, liberty, property, freedom, liberty of movement and freedom to choose residence and freedom from arbitrary arrest as enshrined in the International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights (ICCPR) (1966) (Tibaijuka, 2005). To demonstrate the level of misery and suffering of

vulnerable groups affected by the said programme, the United Nations Report refers to this operation as "a disastrous venture". In September 2005, a consortium of various professional groupings under the barner of the Zimbabwe Human Rights NGO Forum,   reiterated the United Nations position that the Operation was carried out in "an indiscriminate and unjustified manner, with indifference to human suffering and, in repeated cases, with disregard to several provisions of national and international legal frameworks" (page 5).

According to Pincus and Minahan, (1973), social workers must   provide understanding, support and encouragement for people who are in a crisis. This paper contends that the deafening silence of the social work profession in the middle of human suffering only serves to   portray it as an ancillary endeavour. To further strengthen the abusive nature of the operation on the vulnerable groups in Zimbabwean society, the United Nations Special Envoy to Zimbabwe described the situation as a catastrophic injustice (Tibaijuka, 2005). According to the Zimbabwe Human Rights NGO Forum (2005), there are reports that three, or possibly four, people died at the Porta Farm as a result of the forced evictions. A pregnant woman allegedly died when she fell from a truck on which she was being taken away, a five-year-old boy was allegedly run over by a truck, and a terminally ill woman allegedly died when being bundled into a moving truck. In view of such man-made calamities, various professions dug deep into their professional ethos to salvage the situation. Lawyers, led by the Zimbabwe Lawyers for Human Rights worked hard to try and halt the programme. On another note, teachers, through the Progressive Teachers Union of Zimbabwe stepped up their advocacy to try and bring to the fore the plight of children who lost out on their schooling on account of displacement. In the same vain, social workers as custodians and champions of child protection were expected to take action, even of an advocacy nature to promote social justice and safeguard human rights. It is worth noting that by the nature of their profession, social workers are sanctioned by society to provide specific services targeted primarily at helping vulnerable populations (Becket, 2006).

THE RIGHT TO FREEDOM OF ASSEMBLY AND ASSOCIATION

Although this paper is mainly interested in championing the economic, social and cultural rights, due cogniscent is given to the fact that freedom of association is central to the realization of these rights. For instance, it has become difficult for development partners to gather people for development projects. Pincus and Minahan (1973) observe, the responsibilities of social workers to become involved in public issues that have an impact on the private troubles of people and to influence people within social system to make them more responsive to present and potential consumers is crucial. In this light, social workers contribute to the development and modification   of social policies promulgated by legislative bodies, elected heads of government, public administrative agencies and even private agencies.

Assembling and conducting peaceful demonstrations in Zimbabwe is very restricted due to the repressive laws and the heavy handed nature of the police (Ploch, 2010). Individuals, members of the civil society, labor unions have repeatedly arrested while assembling and taking part in peaceful activities (Amnesty International, 2007). The rights to freedom of association and assembly are guaranteed under Articles 10 and 11 of the African Charter on Human and Peoples' Rights and in the ICCPR to which Zimbabwe is a state party (Amnesty International, 2007) the rights to freedom of association and assembly are also guaranteed under Section 21 of the Constitution of Zimbabwe. This article posits that rights to freedom are regularly obstructed in order to prevent members of the public, labor groups, human rights activists, civil society organizations and political opposition parties from peacefully voicing criticism of the government and its policies. Becket (2006) posits that social workers must endeavour to pursue policies, services, resources and programmes through organizational and administrative advocacy and social and political action so as to empower groups at risk and promote social and economic justice.

THE RIGHT TO HEALTH AND EDUCATION

It is worth noting that social workers would conveniently want to confine their operations to the protection of economic, social and cultural rights. In this regard, this paper laments the deafening silence of Zimbabwean social workers when the very rights they claim to protect are being trembled upon. According to Tsunga, (2004) at least forty eight schools were closed in 2002 due to political disturbances. Implicit in such a scenario is that the right to education of many children were infringed upon. Given the quest to protect children as the core mandate of Zimbabwe's social workers, their inaction, let alone silence in the middle of such a state of affairs is a pointer to the deficiencies of the role of social workers in fighting for the cause of the most vulnerable in society. 'More than many professions, Social Work practitioners are conscious that their concerns are closely linked to respect for Human Rights. They accept the premise that Human Rights and fundamental freedoms are

indivisible, and that the full realization of civil and political rights is impossible without enjoyment of economic, social and cultural rights' (International Federation of Social Workers: 3).

In keeping with such a professional position, the role of social workers in protecting the economic, social and cultural rights is beyond doubt. During the past decade, The child health status indicators have worsened; infant mortality and under-five mortality rose from 53 percent to 77 per 1 000 live births in 1994 to 67 and 94 per 1 000 live births respectively in 2009 (Parliamentary Portfolio Committee on Health 2010) quoted in Murisa 2010: 6). The same study further states that as a result of the serious shortage and disruption of transport and telecommunications, several programmes including patient transfers, malaria indoor residual spraying, drug distribution and supervision of districts and rural health centres has been compromised.

CORRUPTION

According to Mmatli, (2008) corruption eats the social fabric, leading to increased lawlessness and undermining of social and political stability. According to Massier, (2009), some scholars have argued for recognition of a right to live in a corruption- free world. They do so on the grounds that endemic corruption destroys the fundamental values of human dignity and political equality, making it impossible to guarantee the rights to life, personal dignity and equality, and many other rights. This paper observes that extensive corruption and nepotism have contributed to the decline in public and investor confidence in Zimbabwe's economy. Zimbabwe was ranked 107 out of 159 countries surveyed in Transparency International's 2005 Corruption Perceptions Index (Freedom House, 2006).

"In practice, corruption is likely to affect the enjoyment of several rights simultaneously. Failure to protect rights associated with political participation, for example, may have an impact on several economic, social and cultural rights because it may affect the design and implementation of social policies and thus the enjoyment of those rights" (Massier, 2009: 31). In keeping with the mandate of the social work profession to safeguard the rights and welfare of the under-priviledged in society, the role of Zimbabwe's social workers in speaking out against corruption is not debatable. As Massier (2009:7) observes, corruption that diverts public resources from essential services or anti-poverty programmes will particularly harm the welfare of women and their dependents.

Conclusion

The social work profession in Zimbabwe is confronted by a plethora of milestones in its quest to safeguard and promote social equality, economic development, political and cultural rights.

This paper further observes that although social work values, principles and ethics receive due emphasis during the course of training, the social work curriculum needs revisiting.

This is particularly urgent given that some of the challenges that the profession has to shoulder have their grounding in the underlying structural circumstances requiring nothing short of political activism (Mmatli, 2008). The nature of the social work practice terrain in Zimbabwe now entails confronting the prevailing political order through lobbying. More so, active participation in political undertakings is an imminent option if the social work profession is to remain relevant in Zimbabwe. Currently, the social work curriculum places much emphasis on a needs based as opposed to a human rights framework as encouraged by the international definition of social work (Healy ,2008). It is further observed that efforts should be made to strengthen the two main social work groupings namely: the National Association of Social Workers (Zimbabwe) as well as the Council of Social Workers. This will go a long way in consolidating the various efforts of social workers to tailor-make their interventions relevant to the dictates of Zimbabwe's current social order.

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